Expendables

Брюс Бетке

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

- Bruce Bethke

Bruce Bethke
Expendables

28 August 1998

I wrote this one in 1986 and sold it in 1988, for publication in early 1990. This certainly isn't the most polished thing I've ever done, but for some reason it's been much on my mind, these last few days.

— BRB

The troops bounced in on lorries a week before the demonstration. Two hundred and forty select Afrikaner guardsmen secured the area and established a perimeter; only when Upington was certified safe did the C-130s leave Johannesburg.

Ryan came on the first plane, cursing the noisy, jarring ride. As soon as he had both feet securely on the ground again he switched to cursing the heat and the dust, and grimly predicting their effects on hand-wired circuitry. Vittorio stayed silent, trying to fan himself with a floppy straw hat too scratchy to wear. The rest of the passengers — engineers and observers, mostly — filed slowly off the plane, blinking nervously at the machine guns and concertina wire.

The second C-130 carried hardware, as did the third. Airborne Command was too large to land at Upington so it stayed on at Johannesburg. Still, Ryan and Vittorio had trained their crews well and by week's end 15 small, shark-like aircraft, their stubby wings bristling with weapons pods, sat assembled in the launch cradles. In deference to Ryan, the noses stayed shrouded. Vittorio called Joburg and announced they were ready on schedule.

The 747 flew serenely through the clouds, miles above the South African veldt. A small cadre of technicians moved through her aft sections, testing and tweaking computer systems and microwave datalinks. The nose cabin, a walnut-panelled lounge with plush carpet the color of ripe avocadoes, contained a party of perhaps 30 people. Lieutenant Colonel Neal Meredith, U.S.M.C., Retired — a strong, stocky man of about 60 years with a lot of gray at the temples and too many memories — straightened his tie, put on his professional lobbyist smile and his native West Texas accent, and eased down the spiral staircase from the flight deck.

An old Cole Porter song was drifting up from the piano bar, and Meredith relaxed a notch. He made a mental note to tip the piano player later. The hostess, recently hired away from a Las Vegas casino, handed him a Manhattan as he came off the stairs. He politely took it,

but did not drink.

A wave here, a nod and a smile there; with long-practiced skill he discreetly established his presence. It was a good crowd to be discreet with: two vice-presidents of the firm he was currently consulting for, a senator who was officially vacationing in Madagascar; five pseudonyms who, judging by the poor way they wore civvies, had to be active military; the usual bunch of aides and sycophants. Meredith moved fluidly through the group, shaking hands, exchanging chat, all the while thinking of how the guerillas could turn this into a truly memorable international incident, if only they had a SAM-6 missile.

But of course, they didn't. That's why the firm had picked this venue for the test.

Meredith worked his way to the edge of the group. Luckily the South Africans had stayed in a tight little clique again so he was able to deal with them quickly and collectively. For all his years in the lobbying trade, brown-nosing all manner of public and private power brokers, he could barely stand the Afrikaners. Each time he looked in their smug white faces he saw images of Otis Washington, the best damned man white or black to ever sit in the aft cockpit of an F-4 Phantom: Otis, whose good luck and quick wits had gotten them through 36 missions together. Otis, tangled in the shroud lines of his half-open parachute, dropping into the dark green Vietnamese jungle arms and legs flailing all the way down down down….

Too many memories. Meredith blinked them away, pasted his professional smile back onto his face, and looked around. One man was conspicuous by his absence: Dr. David Klein, the project director. Part of Meredith's job was to keep track of Klein, so he finished covering the group and slipped through the door to the aft section of the plane. As he expected, he found Klein sitting in a window seat in the technician's cabin, leaning against the glass and staring down at the mottled, tawny earth.

"Doctor Klein?"

Klein nervously twitched around, then remembered he was holding a lit cigarette and took a deep drag on it. At last he said, "I suppose they're waiting."

Meredith nodded. "Target zone in five minutes."

Klein stubbed out his cigarette and stood up. "Let's get this over with."

He sidled out to the aisle and started making his way forward. At the lounge door he stopped, muttered, "God, I hate dog-and-pony shows," then stepped through and started shaking hands. Meredith stayed at his elbow, guiding him through the group. Klein very nearly got mired in a young senate aide's declamation on the legitimate geopolitical uses of force, but Meredith gently detached the woman

and got Klein to the podium at the front of the cabin.

Klein checked the six-foot video screen to make sure it was on, tapped on the podium microphone a few times, then cleared his throat. As the conversation circles broke up and the observers found their seats, Meredith took up station back by the piano bar.

"Good afternoon Sen — uh, distinguished guests," Klein began nervously, "and welcome to the final operational test of the Valkyrie Tactical Weapons Deployment System." Klein tried a smile on the group. The open bar had done its job; most of them smiled back. Klein relaxed visibly. "I'm David Klein, the project director, and the Valkyrie is my baby, so if you have any questions before we start the test I… yes, General?"

Someone in the front row rumbled a question that Meredith didn't catch.

"THAT'S—," Klein jumped back, startled by the loudness of his own voice. Apparently he hadn't realized he was leaning so close to the microphone.

"That's right sir," Klein resumed. "The test is fully automated. Once we give the go code, we don't need to do anything except sit back and enjoy the show." He looked to the rest of the group. "So don't be afraid to interrupt me if you have questions. That's why I'm here: to answer questions."

The young senate aide who'd buttonholed Klein earlier stood up and loudly said, "Can you give us a brief overview of the TWDS project, Mister Klein?"

"Uh, Doctor Klein, if you please. CalTech was too expensive to forget." He tried another smile; it worked again. "As for — well, that was covered in the briefing before we left the States. Didn't you…?" The aide sat down, trying to be inconspicuous and shaking her head. Meredith smiled: he found it somehow reassuring that politicians were still skipping backgrounders.

Klein was looking at the rest of the group, seeking support and not finding it. From the back, Meredith could see that most of the heads were shaking. After a few seconds, Klein shrugged, took a deep breath, and began, "The marketing people will tell you that the A-43 Valkyrie is a high-survivability, remotely-piloted, tactical assault aircraft. Configurable for a wide variety of close-support fire missions, the vehicle can dispense payloads ranging from the M77 Antimaterial/ Antipersonnel Munition to the TGAS Terminally Guided Antitank…." Klein stopped, and looked at his audience again. Aside from the active militaries, most of them were still shaking their heads.

"Okay, it's like this," Klein said. "The most expensive part of a combat aircraft is the crew, right? You expend the crew on a minor mission, your cost/benefit ratio goes right down the toilet. Agreed?"

The head-shaking switched to nodding.

"Now, you can get around this by going to a guided missile," Klein continued. "If you assume that the vehicle is going to be expended, and if the target is important enough, a missile gives you your best return on investment. But if you scale down the importance of the target, and factor in the probability of getting your crew back, then your cost/benefit curves start intersecting and you end up with one conclusion: close-support fire missions are expensive.

"That's why we developed the Valkyrie. Think of it as a reusable cruise missile. We launch it like a cruise missile; it runs to target like a cruise missile; if the mission demands it we can expend it like a cruise missile. But if the mission doesn't demand it, the Valkyrie can deliver munitions like a tactical aircraft and come back."

"Doctor Klein," the Senator drawled, "I think what Sally was trying to say was, we are all familiar with the A-42 Fury." Meredith noted that both corporate vice-presidents blanched. "If I may ask, how does the Valkyrie differ from what one of my colleagues has properly termed, 'that overpriced disaster'?"

"For one thing, it works," Klein shot back. "For ano—"

"Also, I would like to know why it bears such a remarkable resemblance to the A-42 Type E aircraft which my Procurement Committee rejected over two years ago?"

"The Fury and the Valkyrie are built on the same airframe," Klein admitted. Sally gasped as if this were a major revelation. The corporate vice-presidents tried to shrink and hide beneath their seats. "But," Klein continued, overriding whatever it was the Senator was composing himself to deliver, "but the flight electronics are completely different. And the control concept is completely different. The Fury system tried to mimic human control of an aircraft in an enhanced fly-by-wire system. The Valkyrie is a quantum leap beyond that!"

One of the corporate vice-presidents jumped up and turned to the Senator.

"Sir?" Meredith thought it a pity men no longer wore hats; the VP looked as if he wanted to hold his cap in his hands and tug his forelock as he spoke to the Senator. "Sir, Doctor Klein has been under a lot of stress lately and his choice of words may—"

The Senator waved a hand to hush the VP. "Let Klein talk," he said. "I am finding it quite educational." The VP turned to Klein, shot him a glance that clearly meant *Watch your ass*! and sat down. "You were saying, Dr. Klein?" the Senator prompted.

The interruption had defused Klein's stridency. "The Valkyrie is a distributed-processing system. The vehicles carry their basic flight-control and survival programming on-board, which eliminates the Fury's response-time problems and frees up the command processor

for macro-tactical processing. All we need to do is tell it where we want to deploy and when, and service the delivery vehicles. The system plans the mission, selects the objectives, and controls the birds."

The officer in the front row rumbled something.

"No, sir," Klein said, "we don't use that term. If anything, we say it's A.N.V.I. — artificial, but not very intelligent."

"It seems to me," the Senator said, "that you people claimed the Fury was artificially intelligent."

The obsequious vice-president jumped up and blurted out, "The person responsible for that is no longer with the company, sir." Then he looked embarrassed and sat down.

"That concept had some flaws," Klein added, but just then the co-pilot's bland, midwestern voice came over the intercom and cut off further discussion.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the co-pilot said, "we have reached the target zone and are cruising at an altitude of 20,000 feet. It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood, with only a few widely-scattered cumulus clouds, so if you look out the right-side windows you should be able to make out the target just north of the junction of the Molopo and Nossoh rivers." The observers left their seats and began crowding around the windows. The plane banked into a gentle right turn. "Don't all look at once," the co-pilot said, "you'll tip the plane over. Ha ha, just kidding, folks."

Meredith buried his face in his hands and wondered why nice, likable people always turned into amateur comedians when they got hold of microphones.

"We'll be circling the target zone for the duration of the test," the co-pilot continued. "Upington reports the weather is clear and all 15 birds are go for launch, so you can start whenever you're ready. Have a nice day." The intercom clicked off.

After a minute or two, Meredith got everyone back into their seats and dimmed the cabin lights. Klein turned up the brightness on the projection TV until everyone could see the 15 cartoon aircraft on the screen. "This screen echoes the main operator's terminal," Klein said. "As you can see, the interface uses a friendly, graphics-oriented approach that can be understood by anyone with third-grade reading skills." Klein pulled a pen out of his shirt pocket and began pointing things out on the screen. "The brain icon means that the on-board computer checks out; the map icon means the navigational parameters have been downloaded and verified; I think you can guess what the gas tank and bomb icons mean." Klein put the pen back in his pocket and put his hand on the intercom phone. "Any more questions before we start?"

No one spoke, so he lifted the phone and said, "It's a go." In ripples of three, the cartoon aircraft zipped off the of the screen. The piano player struck up "Off We Go Into the Wild Blue Yonder," and Meredith changed his mind about tipping him. When the last of the aircraft were gone, the screen switched to display a cluster of tiny red arrows crawling across a map.

The co-pilot's voice crackled over the intercom. "Upington reports all 15 birds away smooth as silk. ETA over target, three minutes 15 seconds."

Silently, everyone watched the red arrows close in on the target.

Meredith found the first minute quite tolerable.

During the second minute, the steady hiss of the cabin air system began to get on his nerves.

By the end of the third minute, the whine of the engines felt like dentist's drills going into his ears. "Is this it?" Sally asked in a loud, bored whisper.

"There they are!" someone at a window shouted. Everyone rushed to the windows again, so Meredith looked at the video screen instead. It had switched from a scrolling map to a 3-D graphic plot of the target zone.

Hawking arrowheads chased frantic targets across the gridded landscape and erased them. Klein stood alongside the screen, hoping someone would ask him a question. Meredith caught his eye; they exchanged shrugs and *what-are-we-doing-here*? smiles.

After a few minutes the view out the window got boring, so the observers began turning to the video screen. Meredith slipped over to a window and looked down; it wasn't hard to spot the target. Spider legs of white phosphorus still hung in the air over it; the first two attack wings had surrounded the target with a cross-hatch border of orange napalm and then dropped willy pete in the middle. Thick black smoke was already rising from the fires, as tiny dark specks darted around the target like a swarm of midges. One of them apparently disgorged a load of M-77's; a ripple of fire walked down a hill and across the center of the target, ending in the expanding bubble of a high-explosive shock wave.

Meredith tasted bile in the back of his throat. An HE shock wave, and out of the corner of his eye the rising roman candle of a SAM, then the canopy shattered and he was punching out on pure instinct and Otis….

Meredith found a vacant seat and sat down, blinking away tears and fighting down nausea.

The Valkyries took all the programmed targets within five minutes and moved on to targets of opportunity. Within ten minutes

they'd completely neutralized the site; within 15 they were safely snared in the landing webs at Upington and Airborne Command was en route back to Joburg. Three hours after launch, Meredith and Klein were sitting in the hotel bar, celebrating.

They'd started with vodka and lime, which got them talking about Russians, then switched to gin and tonics, which steered the conversation around to the Brits and NATO. Eventually they got around to Bloody Marys by the pitcherful and Great Moments in Field Testing. Quite a lot of Bloody Marys had come and gone.

"Now, I can't guarantee this one's true," Klein began another story, "but the way I heard it… this was back around '70, '71, they were testing the

first Phoenix missile in New Mexico. Were you…? No, you couldn't have been with the company then. I was still in primary school. Where were you in '70?"

"Nowhere important," Meredith said.

"No, c'mon," Klein badgered him. "Where were you?"

"In a tiger cage near Hanoi," Meredith said softly.

Klein blushed. "Oh geez, I'm sorry, I–I didn't…" The liquor got the better of him.

"Right, anyway, they were testing the Phoenix down in New Mexico. Now, that baby had a low-band radar, and they were real worried about Russki jamming, so they gave it this home-on-jam mode with priority over everything else. Any hash in the air, it locks on the transmitter and flies right down its throat, okay?"

"Okay." Meredith refilled his glass from the pitcher.

"So the target's a drone F-102, about thirty miles downrange. They pop off a missile first thing in the morning, and it's perfect. Scratch one obsolete jet. They pop off a second one about noon, and it's about 15 miles downrange when suddenly it takes a 90-degree turn to the east and it is gone! That's it, they postpone the rest of the schedule until they can recover the second bird and find out what went wrong."

"What did they find?" Meredith asked, helpfully.

"Nothing. I mean, they found the missile, but there was nothing wrong with it. So they start up testing again a few days later, and the same thing happens. The morning shot is perfect. The noon shot is halfway downrange, and it suddenly shears off due east again."

"Ahahh…" Meredith said, comprehension dawning.

"You start to see a pattem?" Klein asked. Meredith nodded slowy. "Well, it took them a couple more tries and a couple strange theories about heat and sunspots and such before someone decided to just drive over and see what that Phoenix was so interested in."

"And they found?"

"About 50 miles off the east there was this guy with an illegal overpower CB rig and a hundred-foot mast, and every day at noon he'd start calling up his good buddies all over the state!" Klein slapped the table and collapsed in a fit of manic cackling.

When he recovered, Meredith noted, "Lucky thing the poor bastard didn't catch a missile through his roof."

"Or too bad! We could have opened up a whole new market!" Klein did a fair imitation of a RonCo TV pitchman when he was drunk, and he launched into it. "Are amateur radio operators putting a crimp in your TV viewing pleasure? Get the new RonCo CB Killer!"

"New Mexico." Meredith shook his head slowly, hoping to change the subject. "Lovely state."

Klein was not to be deterred. "And if you order now, you'll get this set of beautiful Ninja survival steak knives absolutely free!" Klein tried to refill his glass, only to find that the pitcher of Bloody Marys was empty. Drunk, he became a man of decisive action. "Eindander!" he yelled at the barmaid, bad German being the closest he could come to Afrikaans.

The barmaid, who could speak perfect BBC English when she chose to, thought both Americans were already sufficiently drunk and obnoxious. They were also, however, heavy tippers, so she just smiled and fetched the pitcher.

Klein turned back to Meredith. "You were saying…?"

Meredith blinked. "I—? Oh yes, New Mexico. I don't suppose you were at Schleyer's range trials, were you?"

"Oh God, was I ever!" Klein yelled. "Weren't they a hoot?"

Meredith's eyebrows went up. "I wouldn't know," he admitted. "I signed on after the test. Schleyer said he was looking for a fighter jock with real combat experience, and I was looking for a chance to get out of lobbying and back into flying." Meredith shrugged. "Then they sacked Schleyer and made me a lobbyist. So for two years I've been hearing that the Fury field trials were a total disaster, and I still don't know what happened."

Klein started to lounge back in his chair; when the front legs lifted off the floor he realized his balance wasn't up to par and lurched forward again. "Pretty simple," Klein said. "In five separate tests, Schleyer flew five prototypes into the same side of the same mountain. Pissed away 15, maybe 20 million dollars, and he still wouldn't admit that the system had a fundamental design flaw." Klein leaned across the table and lowered his voice to a conspiratorial growl. "Y'see, the problem with the Fury was Schleyer himself. You ever deal with him personally? Danke," he added, as the barmaid topped up his glass and set the pitcher on the table.

"Gracias señor," she replied, but it slipped by him.

Meredith got the feeling he was unleashing a reply of an argument that Klein had lost many times and tried to tread gently. "I met Schleyer once," he answered. "He seemed nice enough."

"He was faking it," Klein declared. "Schleyer was arrogant, authoritarian, and very jealous of his power. A perfect example of the Head Cheese syndrome: couldn't trust subordinates to make decisions. Didn't want to hear anyone else's ideas. You know what it's like to work under a mindset like that for six years?" Klein knocked back his drink and started fumbling for his cigarettes.

Meredith stared quietly into his glass. "Yeah, I know the type."

The cigarette seemed to calm Klein. "Schleyer was in Remotely Piloted Vehicles right from the start; back when it was radio-control and a guy with a joystick on a box. Model Airplane stuff. So when he started the Fury project, that's the approach he took. Digitized the controls of a T-38 and recorded a test pilot putting the thing through aerobatics. Then he put a rudimentary A.I. up on top to evaluate the situational data coming back from the birds, shuffle through the control routines, and formulate an action sequence. It's a high-order anatomical model, right? Brain, nerves, fingers?"

"Makes sense," suggested Meredith. He was starting to feel irritable. "Except you don't consciously think about every muscle involved in moving your finger! The Fury was all forebrain; no reflexes, no autonomic nervous system. Every damn trim tab adjustment had to go through the A.I.! It was an Einstein that had to remember to make its heart beat." Klein sloshed some more Bloody Mary near his glass. "I s'pose that, given five more years, we could have ironed out the bugs. We've already solved the reflex problem. Just changed the anatomical model a little, is all." Klein looked Meredith straight in the eye and raised his finger portentously.

"Y'know, a grasshopper's brain doesn't know diddly squat about jumping. It just thinks, 'Jump!'" Klein reached around and started poking himself in the back. "Grasshopper's got these ganglia all down its notochord, take care of the actual mechanics of the business. You can cut a grasshopper's head off and the damn thing'll still jump.

"That's what we did to the Fury. Put a ganglion in each vehicle and cut most of its head off. The geeks in avionics software are already calling me 'Klein the Philistine.' In 20 years they'll probably put the Fury right up there with Babbage's analog computer as another brilliant idea murdered young." Klein looked at Meredith with an expression that was almost a plea for understanding. "But dammit, I gotta deliver a product the military'll buy! You have any idea how those jarheads reacted when the A.I. started arguing tactics with them? That's the last thing they want: a weapons system that sits up and says, 'I think, therefore why am I taking orders from you?' They

get enough of that from humans."

Meredith started to suspect that he'd feel better if Klein shut up.

Ryan burst in. "There you are! I've been looking all over for you two. We're showing the game film in the Soweto Room!" Klein leaned back and blinked unsteadily at Ryan. "The gun camera tapes from the birds," Ryan clarified. "I spliced 'em together and stole a projection TV from the convention hall. C'mon, you have got to see this!" Klein lurched to his feet and followed Ryan out of the lounge; Meredith stayed behind to settle the bill.

"Sorry my friend was so loud," he mumbled as he handed his charge card to the barmaid. "He's had a very exciting day."

The barmaid smiled and started toting up the bill. "Oh, he's your friend, then?" She ran the card through the reader and handed it back. "The way you two act, I'd thought him a spoiled child and you his nanny." She smiled again and gave the charge slip to Meredith; he added in 50 percent and signed it. "Thank you, sir!" she said when she saw the tip.

Meredith shrugged. "It's not my money. You want more?"

Her smile fell. "I'd hoped you were above that. Why is it all you Americans think all the hotel help are prostitutes?"

"Sorry. I didn't mean it that way." Meredith tried to give her a real smile, but felt his professional smile coming on and decided to leave his face blank instead. "I just thought I'd share the company's largess. One hired hand to another."

"Thank you, no." She picked up a few ashtrays and dumped them in the rubbish. "And if you don't mind advice from someone young enough to be your third wife, stop thinking of yourself as hired help. It leads to feeling you are a prostitute. I know." Someone at the other end of the bar called for her, and she stepped away.

Meredith tucked the card back in his billfold and decided to check out the Valkyrie film festival.

Sally and one of the younger active duty men were standing just outside of the Soweto Room. She was holding a glass of champagne in her hand and expounding on the military's legitimate role in domestic politics; he was nodding seriously and intently watching her breasts. Meredith threaded through the knot of people standing just inside the door and found a vacant bit of wall at the back of the darkened room, near the Senator. The screen at the other end of the room showed silent images of moving smoke and sky.

"Here you see the small-arms fire detector at work," Ryan was pointing out. "Two of the other birds have registered the muzzle pressure wave from a Kalashnikov, and this bird is going to vector in on…ah, here we go."

The Valkyrie whipped into a dizzying turn and dove through the smoke. For a fraction of a second, a man holding a rifle was clearly visible. Then a stream of tracers leapt out to meet him and he was lost in smoke and dust.

The picture cut to a shot of peaceful brown plains rolling by. "Now this is the view from the third attack wing," Ryan said. "They're coming in from the southwest at treetop level." Meredith could feel the rise as the Valkyrie tracked up the slope of a slight ridge; somebody in the darkened room yelled, "Whee!" as it came down into the green Nossoh River valley.

Most of the rebel camp was already surrounded by massive fires. As the camera closed in, another Valkyrie darted across the screen and gouged an angry orange napalm claw mark through the brush. "Look at that synchronization!" Klein shouted from somewhere near the front of the room.

"You can't do that with crewed aircraft!" The camera burst through the wall of flame and came on the center of the camp, where it spotted an open truck loaded with — women? children? Meredith found it hard to tell — bouncing off to the left. The Valkyrie corrected slightly, but before it fired, an incendiary burst near the truck and the people were enveloped in a cloud of searing white phosphorus.

Ground and sky swirled as the bird executed a tight turn. When the view steadied again the Valkyrie was diving on the truck from another angle. The truck was ablaze but still moving; the bodies on the open bed were flaming cordwood. A few of them were still alive, though, even with burning phosphorus glued to their skins, and one rolled off the tailgate, tried to stand, and was caught in a spray of tracers. Then a TGAW streaked out to impact on the truck's cab and the camera swept over the scene.

Meredith shut his eyes tightly. He shut his eyes, and clenched his teeth, and listened to the pleased whispers and orgasmic gasps from the people in the dark room.

"The fourth attack wing delivered high explosives to the structures," Ryan said. "The best pictures of that activity came from the cameras of the first wing." Meredith opened his eyes long enough to see a large shed disintegrating in an HE blast. The shed was plainly marked with a red cross on a white flag. "As you can see, we do have a minor problem with the pattern recognition algorithm."

"Piece of cake!" Klein shouted. "We'll fix it in the next revision!"

"Here's the last reel," Ryan concluded. "After taking all the assigned and opportunity targets, the birds made several low-speed passes over the target to verify mission completion." Meredith blinked away the tears and opened his eyes again. The camera was taking a

slow, leisurely pass over the camp; where the M77's had fallen, the ground and everything on it was churned into a brown, featureless mass. Where they hadn't fallen, though, it was littered with wreckage, craters, burning vehicles, broken dark things that might have been bodies….

Meredith sagged to his knees, choking on the bile rising in the back of his throat. Putting out his hands to steady himself, he brushed against a large wastebasket.

He vomited into the wastebasket. Quietly, wrackingly, until there was nothing left in his stomach but an old and bitter feeling, and still he kept doubling up and retching. Quietly.

"Well," the Senator boomed as the lights came up, "I must say, that was a most convincing demonstration! Doctor Klein, you have completely removed any doubts I may have felt about the Valkyrie system, and I am pleased to say that you can count on my whole-hearted support in the upcoming hearings!

"Gentlemen, we have today witnessed the dawning of a new age in miliatary aviation! No longer will brave men needlessly risk their lives—" the Senator stopped, and sniffed. "What's that smell?" he uttered. Then he looked down to see Meredith with his head still in the wastebasket.

"Colonel Meredith, sir, are you all right?"

Meredith looked up, a feral gleam in his eyes. Slowly, unsteadily, he got to his feet and leaned in close to the Senator. "No Senator," he growled, his breath sour with the reek of vomit. "I am sick." The Senator tried to edge away, but Meredith followed him. "I am sick of you, Senator. I am sick of this pathetic little country we're in. And I am sick unto death of this whole God-damned business."

A ghastly hush settled over the room as people realized that something was happening. "I am sick of feeling like a prostitute!" Meredith shouted. "I am sick of telling people like you exactly what you want to hear, no more, no less." He spun around to face the rest of the room. "Are you listening? This time I'll tell you what I want to say!"

"Klein!" Meredith pointed. "Klein, you are a little boy at a crowded beach, throwing rocks just to see how far they go. Where do the rocks come down, Klein? Do you ever think of that? Or isn't people's pain real for you?" The doctor sat there, slackjawed and uncomprehending.

"Chambers!" Meredith shouted at the corporate vice-president. "Today we murdered, what, 50 people? A hundred people? But it wasn't murder, was it, because we killed them with the full approval of their government! How do you sleep at night, knowing that you make your living keeping sadists and thugs in power?" The corporate

VP sputtered something and tried to form a retort, but Meredith had turned back to the Senator.

"And Senator Brock! You know what the Valkyrie really does? It makes killers obsolete!" Meredith grabbed the Senator by the lapels and leaned in close; Brock shrank from his breath. "You should never make killers obsolete, Senator. Killing is a close and personal thing. You need to smell their fear when you kill them. You smell afraid, Senator. Are you afraid?" The Senator tried to back away, but found he was up against the wall.

"Have you ever seen someone who's been napalmed, Senator?" Meredith continued, low and guttural. "Have you ever seen a living face that's been burned down to cartilage and bone? I have. I've seen arms and intestines hanging from the trees like bloody fruit. I've watched a woman spend all day dying from a septic gut wound, and seen her children hobbling around on infected, oozing stumps.

"Does that disgust you, Senator? Death is supposed to make you sick. That's why it smells so bad. It's supposed to be the most nauseating, horrible, gut-twisting thing you could ever witness, and maybe that way you'll remember why you don't kill more often." Meredith released the Senator and turned away.

"Klein! Do you know what you've done? These bastards keep balance sheets in human lives! This many spent; that many taken: and if they take more than they spend, they win!

"You've given them cost-free war, Klein! No more soldiers' widows crying by the sides of flag-draped caskets. No more heart-broken kids wondering why daddy's never coming home again. No more maimed and mutilated veterans sitting out in public view, reminding the voters that war is really a vile business!

"You know what your Valkyrie really is, Klein? It's a crutch that lets slugs like the Senator here stand up tall enough to get their hands on the trigger! Be it in the name of national honor, or national pride, or whatever affront to their tiny little manhoods they're feeling this week, it doesn't cost them anything to launch the Valkyrie!"

Meredith's voice dropped. "That makes it too easy to use. They can forget the cost to the people it comes down on." Shaking his head, Meredith started walking slowly out of the room. "God, I wish I was a plain old prostitute," he muttered. "I'm sick and tired of feeling like some kind of pimp for Death."

The people at the door stepped aside and let him pass. When Meredith was gone, Klein blurted, "What the hell was that about?"

"It seems Mr. Meredith needs a career change," the corporate vice-president said grimly.

"A sad, sad, case," Senator Brock observed, shaking his head. "He was a war hero, you know; shot down over Vietnam. This must be that

delayed stress syndrome they talk about."

"You see now why we need the A-43?" the active duty general added.

"Sometimes ordinary combat trauma will turn an otherwise good man into a totally useless wreck."

"Well, that's why we built it!" Klein said. "Our little baby is gonna save lives. Hey Ryan! Can you run that tape again?"

"Sure thing!" Ryan yelled back. Someone dimmed the lights, Ryan started the tape, and the Senator sent out for popcorn.

© Bruce Bethke 1988, 1998—"Expendables" was first published in Tales of the Unanticipated, Spring 1990.